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SUBJECT: TRIUMPH OVER NEGATIVE IMAGES IN ULTRA- NATIONALIST HEARTLAND
OF SERBIA

Summary

1. (SBU) In a "tactical strike" on anti-American sentiment, the Embassy brought in a U.S. Navy band to play at the annual brass band festival in Guca, in Serbia's nationalist-leaning heartland. While the appearance of the band in the rowdy, beer-lubricated environment of this festival of traditional Serbian music was a risk, the band was welcomed by officials, event organizers, and, most importantly, the people. There was a low spot during a late-night concert when the drunken crowd booed the band (and other international bands); but the positive reaction during the rest of six-day festival, and the almost jubilant support from national media, showed that the risk paid off. The band's impact shows that Serbs are ready for a change in tone, but Serbia's senior leadership must come up with more courageous language stressing the new phase in our relations. End Summary.

Trumpet Diplomacy in the Heart of Serbia

2. (U) The small Serbian village of Guca hosted the 49th annual brass band festival, which gathered the best brass bands, or trubaci, from Serbia and abroad (<http://www.saborguca.com>). While there are only about 2,000 permanent residents in Guca, more than half a million revelers pour in during the festival every year. Our Public Diplomacy, Defense Attache Office and RSO worked together to arrange for the Naval Forces Europe and Africa Allied Forces Band to perform at the Guca festival this year from August 5-10. The band, known as the Diplomats, is based in Naples, Italy.

Potential Risk, Overwhelmingly Positive Response

3. (U) The band's appearance could potentially have backfired, due to anti-U.S. views typical among participants at the event. Guca lies in Serbia's central Sumadija region, where strong nationalist sentiment still rules and most people associate the United States with the NATO bombing campaign of 1999. The festival attracts

individuals with similar leanings, together with foreigners, putting them into a raucous environment of loud music, traditional Serbian food grilled over hot fires, and free-flowing beer. The appearance of a U.S. military band in white Navy uniform in the heartland of Serbia could have invited a negative reaction from participants and the press.

14. (U) To set a positive tone before the festival, the band performed live on Serbia's most popular morning show, and the PAO was interviewed explaining how the visit came about. Embassy organizers worked closely with the RSO, a Serbian Interior Ministry protection team, and local police to balance security concerns with public diplomacy objectives.

15. (U) The reaction was enthusiastic. Whether on stage or walking through the festival crowds at Guca, band members and Embassy officers were greeted with enthusiasm and respect. Festival-goers responded to the Diplomats' down-to-earth demeanor. Press reported that the U.S. Embassy was in Guca "for the music," seeing our presence as a sign of respect for Serbian traditional culture. Every day during the festival, national and local press wrote articles exclusively about the U.S. Navy band and U.S. Embassy support for the festival. Even rabidly anti-U.S. tabloid "Kurir" wrote a positive article featuring a photo of the band with the Cultural Attache. Prominent national daily "Politika" carried photos of the band on its front page. Municipality mayor and festival chairman Slobodan Jolovic was an enthusiastic host. Jolovic appeared with the Charge in a press conference August 8 and thanked her for fulfilling her promise from the prior year to bring an American band in 2009.

16. (U) The Diplomats hit just the right tone in all their public statements: modest and complimentary. Navy band trumpeter Antonio Rice said members of a local orchestra had "lips of steel" from playing their fast trubaci-style music. Following the August 8 press conference, the Diplomats took to the stage with the local band for an impromptu joint concert, which was again replayed nationally. The Charge told the media that the band had come to the Guca festival to enjoy the atmosphere as musicians and to play, listen, and learn from Serbia's greatest talents.

One Flat Note

17. (U) There was only one low point in an otherwise perfect week. During the late-night Friday (August 7) Radio-Television Serbia (RTS)' televised concert, the U.S. Navy band joined international groups from Slovenia, Switzerland, Romania, France, Sweden, Greece, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Macedonia in a concert following the locally famous Balkanika and Boban and Marko Markovic Orchestras. Partially due to the RTS team's poor choice of timing but also because the huge, popular orchestras and easily accessible beer had the crowd whipped into a frenzy, the Diplomats were greeted with boos, and a few bottles were thrown on the stage. However, once the Diplomats started their rendition of a traditional and popular Serbian song "Svilen Konac," the mood of the crowd shifted, and when they moved to American popular music, James Brown's "I Feel Good," the spectators danced along. The next morning's

press said that the professional attitude, bravery, and musical talent of the U.S. military band won the day, and the "hooligans" and "drunks" did not take away from the atmosphere and goodwill of the celebration.

Comment

18. (SBU) The Friday night jeers and a similar reaction to the U.S. athletic team at the opening ceremony of the Universiade games in July show that there is much work to be done to change perceptions in Serbia. Public opinion polls continue to show an unfavorable rating for the United States at 93%. Anger at the United States has been built up and sustained by many years of anti-U.S. rhetoric. While most of this rhetoric now comes from the ultra-nationalist opposition, ordinary people still know little about the positive sides of the relationship between Serbia and the United States, despite our constant, upbeat public profile. The leadership has failed to explain that the negative events of the 1990s were the fault of the Milosevic regime, leaving people to fixate on the United States. Negative views have been aggravated in the wake of Kosovo's independence. While only the Serbian leadership can bring about a decisive shift in thinking, the warm response nationwide to the U.S. Navy's appearance in Guca shows that the Serbian public is ready to move forward in our relationship. End Comment.
BRUSH